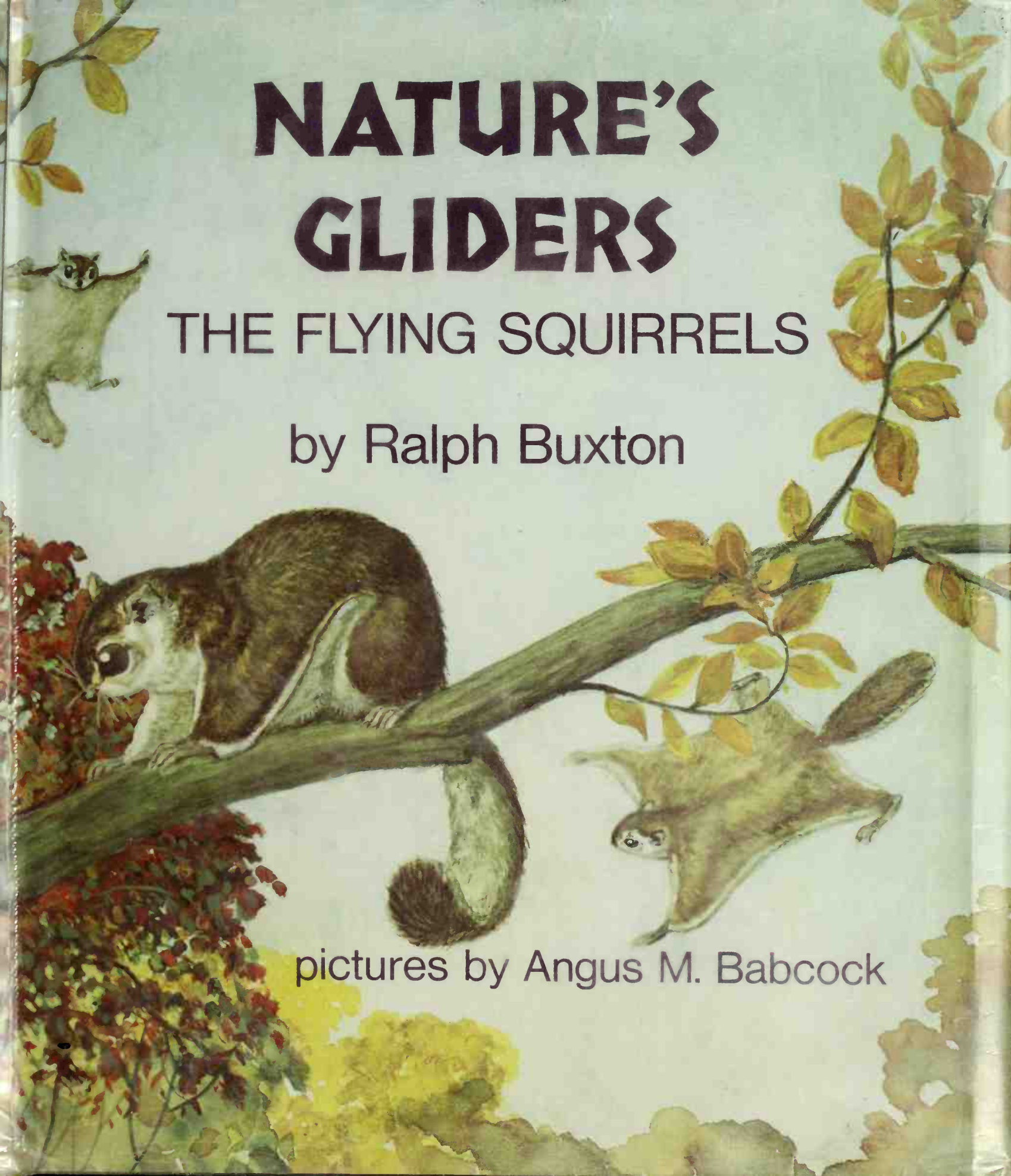
NATURE'S GLIDERS

THE FLYING SQUIRRELS

by Ralph Buxton



pictures by Angus M. Babcock

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THE FLYING SQUIRRELS

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Night has settled over the forest. Most of the forest creatures are asleep—but not the flying squirrel. He has just waked up from his long day's nap and is ready for action. He stations himself on a branch of the old beech tree and looks about him carefully. He is planning his first glide. There he goes, sailing through the air! The special flaps of skin on each side of his body are spread out, making him look like a square kite. He can turn and dive, twist and dodge if he needs to, and he can travel as far as a hundred and fifty feet in a single glide.

In this fascinating book, naturalist Ralph Buxton presents one of earth's most captivating creatures, a nocturnal little animal found in most of North America as well as in many other parts of the world. Here is a detailed picture of the flying squirrel's unique way of life, spent for the most part up in the treetops. Yet, as the author points out, even in the wild flying squirrels are unusually friendly to man and those raised in captivity make gentle and lovable pets. Angus Babcock's detailed drawings in two colors add greatly to a book which is sure to charm as well as inform a host of young readers.

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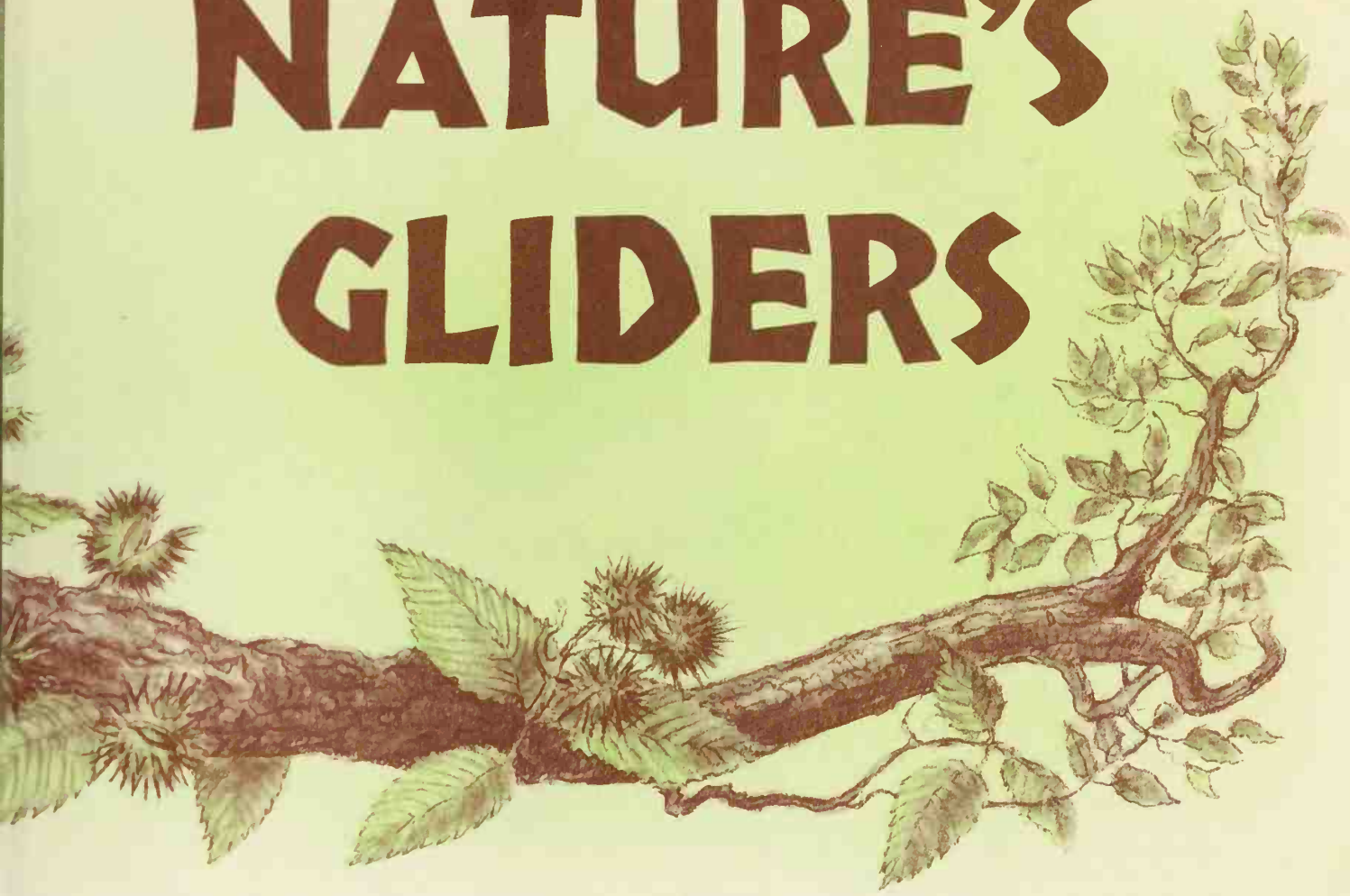

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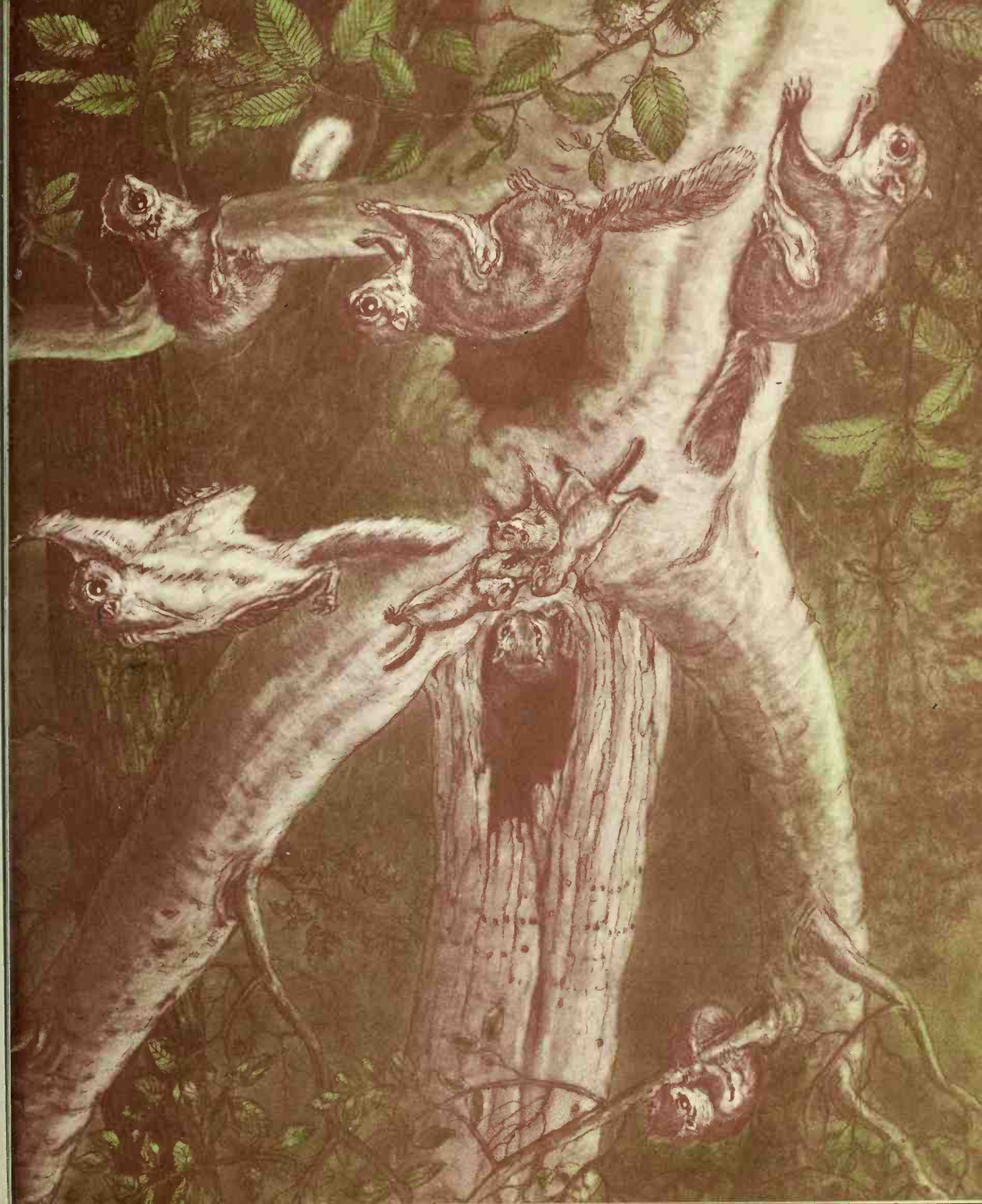
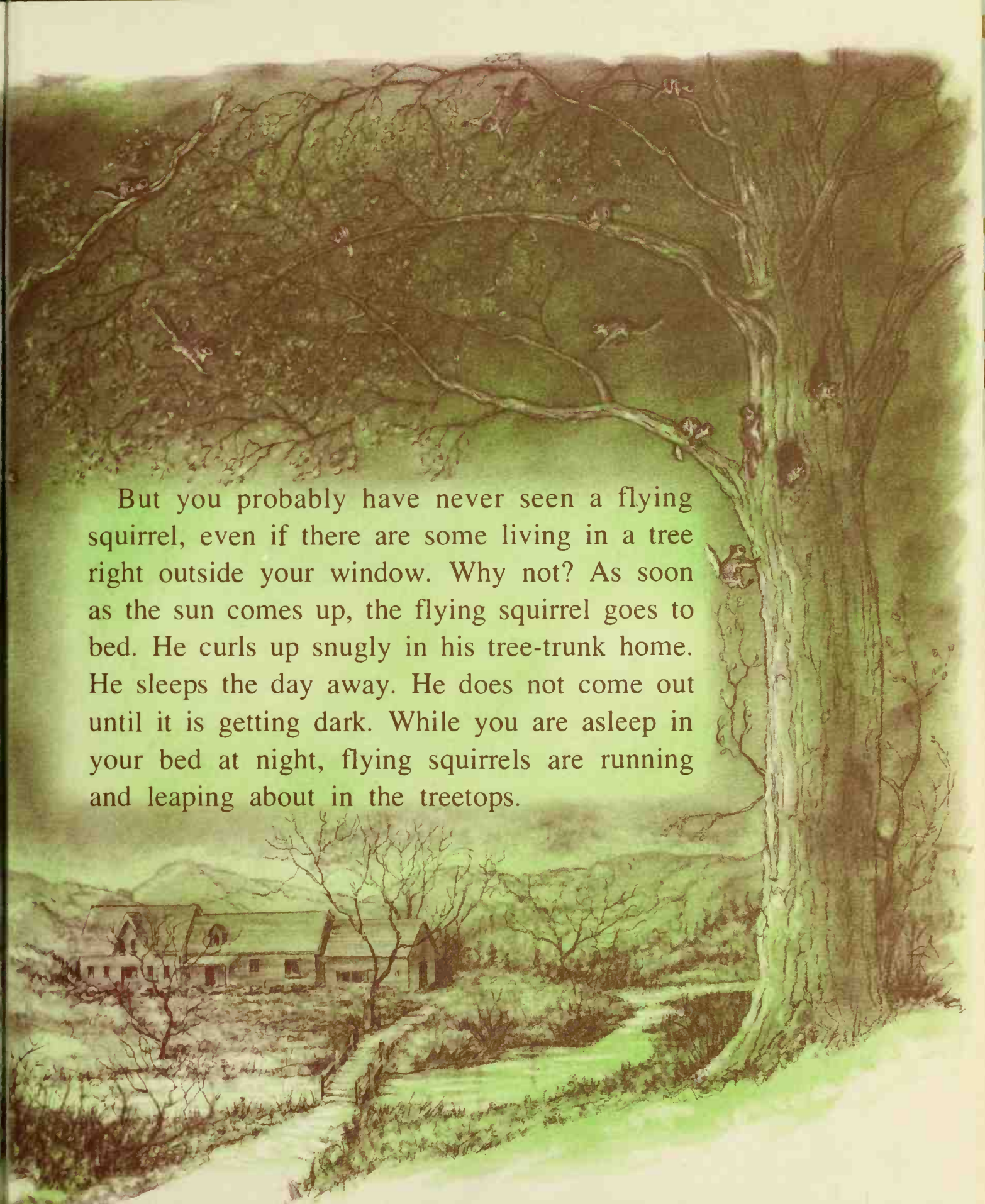
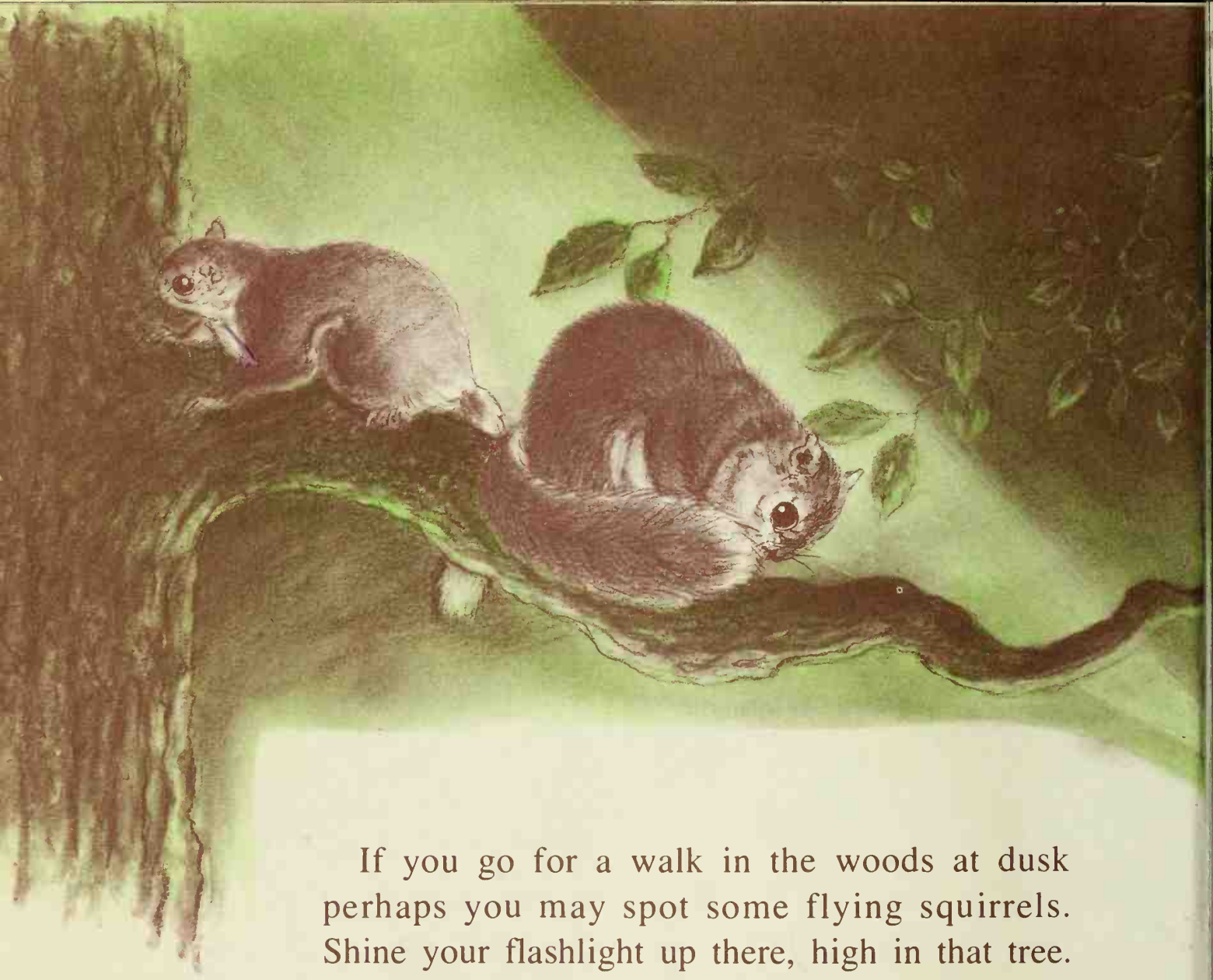


The branches of the old beech tree are shaking. A boy is climbing up the trunk. He stops to rest. Then he sees a woodpecker hole. It is dark inside. "Is anybody home?" he calls. He knocks on the tree trunk. Suddenly some small furry animals come bursting out of the hole, like popcorn popping out of a pan. They sail through the air, spread out like small furry kites. The boy has waked up a nest of flying squirrels sleeping inside the old tree.

Perhaps some flying squirrels live near your home. They are found in most of North America. Flying squirrels live in Europe and Asia, too — wherever there are forests. Some flying squirrels even live in the shade trees on the streets in towns.



But you probably have never seen a flying squirrel, even if there are some living in a tree right outside your window. Why not? As soon as the sun comes up, the flying squirrel goes to bed. He curls up snugly in his tree-trunk home. He sleeps the day away. He does not come out until it is getting dark. While you are asleep in your bed at night, flying squirrels are running and leaping about in the treetops.



If you go for a walk in the woods at dusk perhaps you may spot some flying squirrels. Shine your flashlight up there, high in that tree. A flying squirrel is perched on a branch. He is looking down with his big dark eyes. He can see in the dark. Now he moves his head to one side. Then he moves his head to the other side. He is looking very carefully. He is planning exactly where he will land. Now he is crouching down. He looks like a furry ball.

There he goes! He is sailing through the air, right over your head. How big he looks. He looks like a square kite. His long flat tail is trailing behind him. He has a special flap of skin on each side of his body. The flaps stretch down from his wrists to his ankles. While he was sitting on the branch this extra skin was folded up. He looked just like an ordinary squirrel. But now his four legs are sticking straight out. His skin flaps are stretched out tight. He is riding through the air just like a kite.

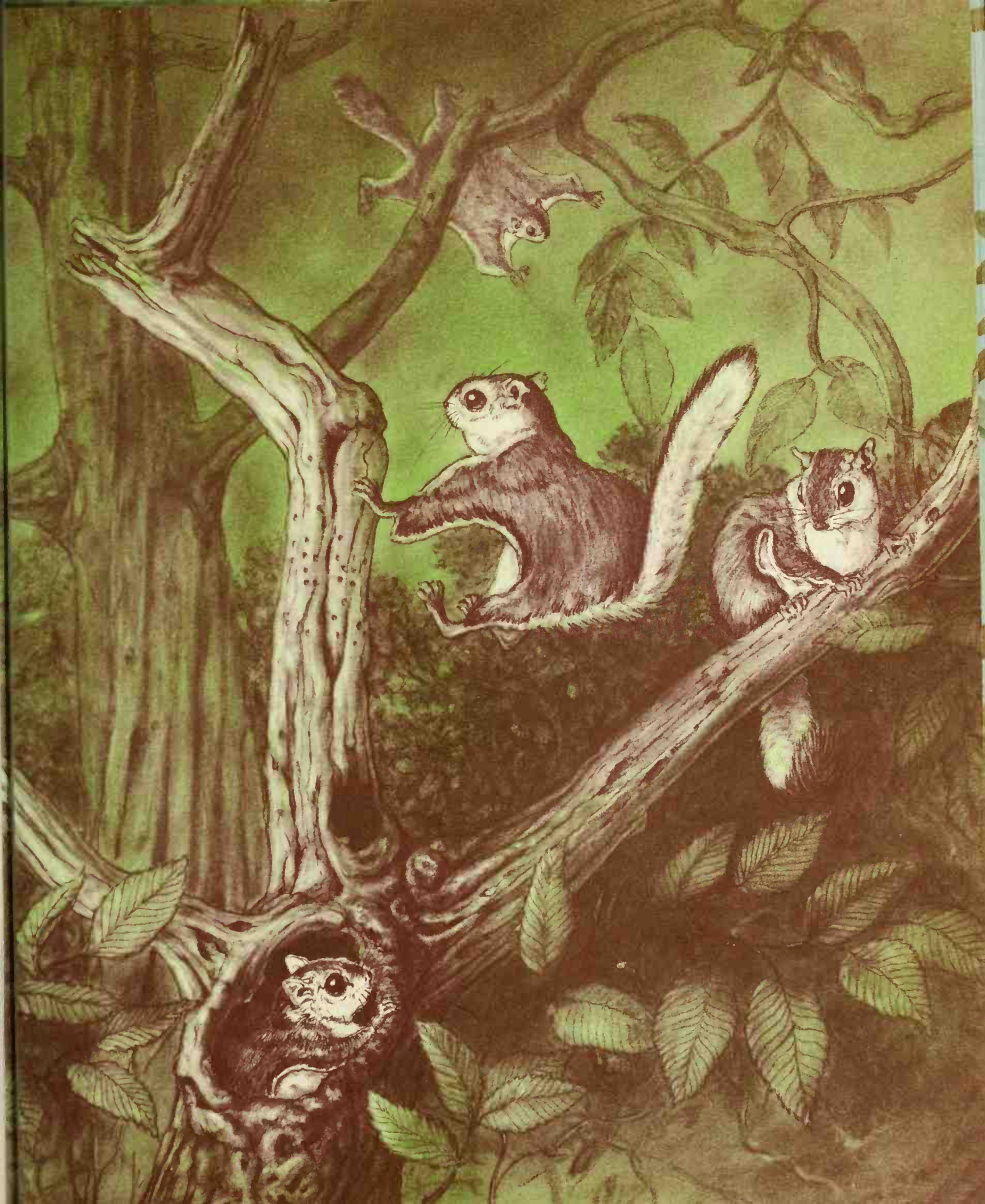
Watch out! There is a branch in the way. He is going to crash!

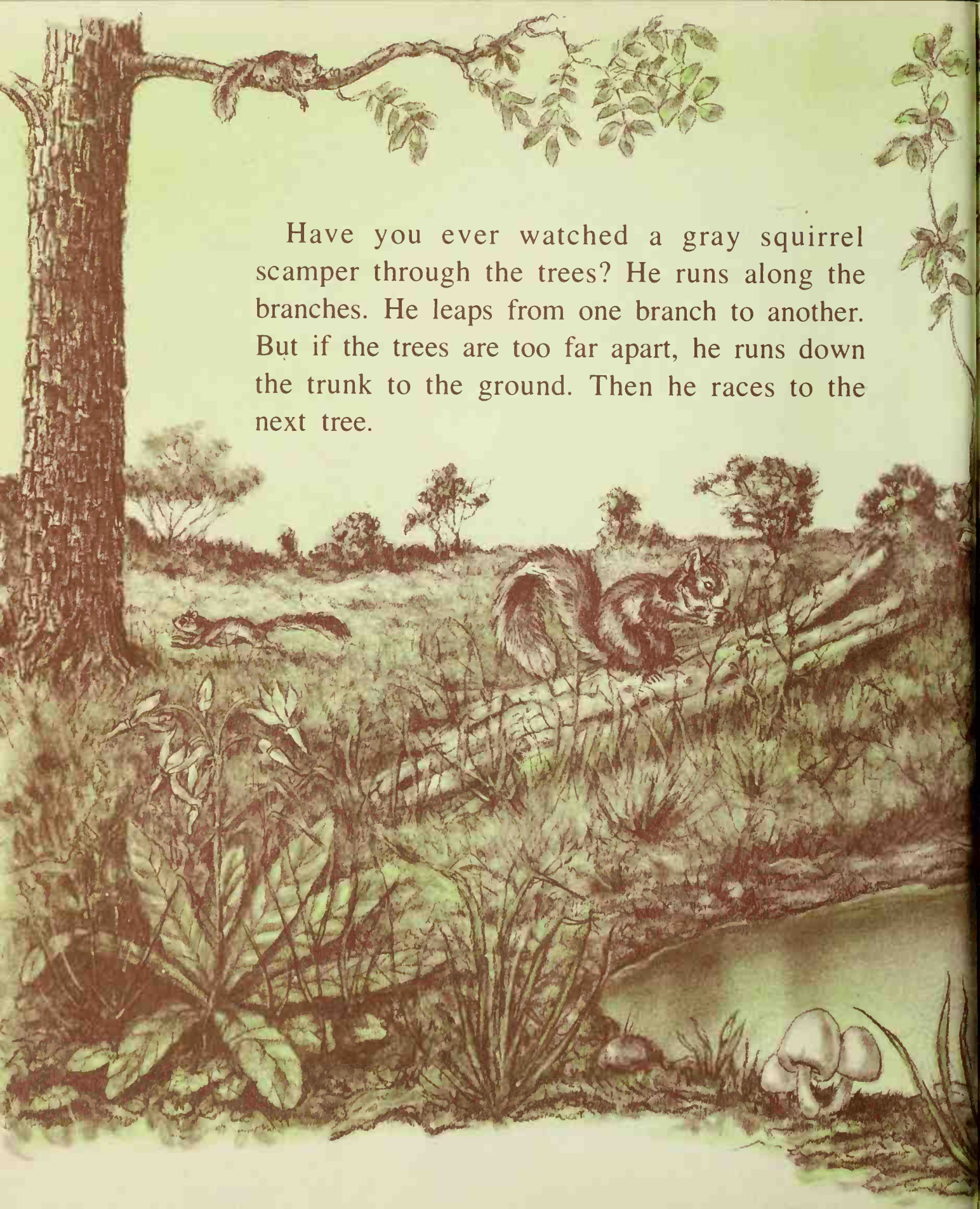
Before you can blink, the flying squirrel turns and dives under the branch. He can steer while he sails through the air. He steers by moving his legs and tail. He can twist and dodge. He can even turn right around in the air.

Now he is coming in for a landing. His tail flicks up, and then his whole body turns up. *Whoosh!* He has landed on a tree trunk. He is holding on with all four feet. He clings to the bark with his sharp toenails.

The flying squirrel has disappeared! Where did he go? As soon as he landed, he scampered around to the other side of the tree trunk. Now he is climbing the tree. He is getting ready for another leap.

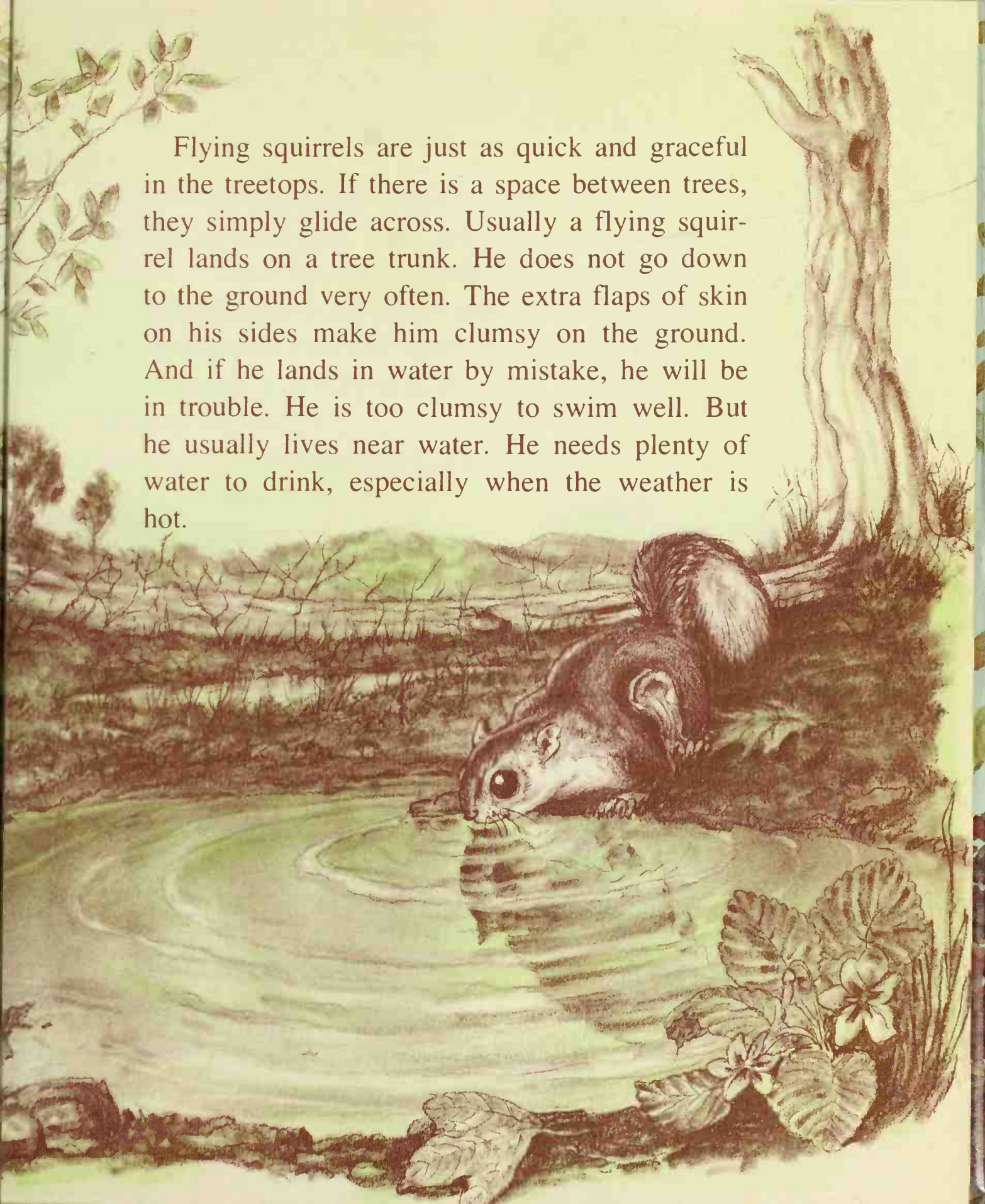
A flying squirrel does not really fly. He glides. He can travel a hundred and fifty feet in a single glide. But he cannot fly up. His landing place is always lower than the place where he started out.



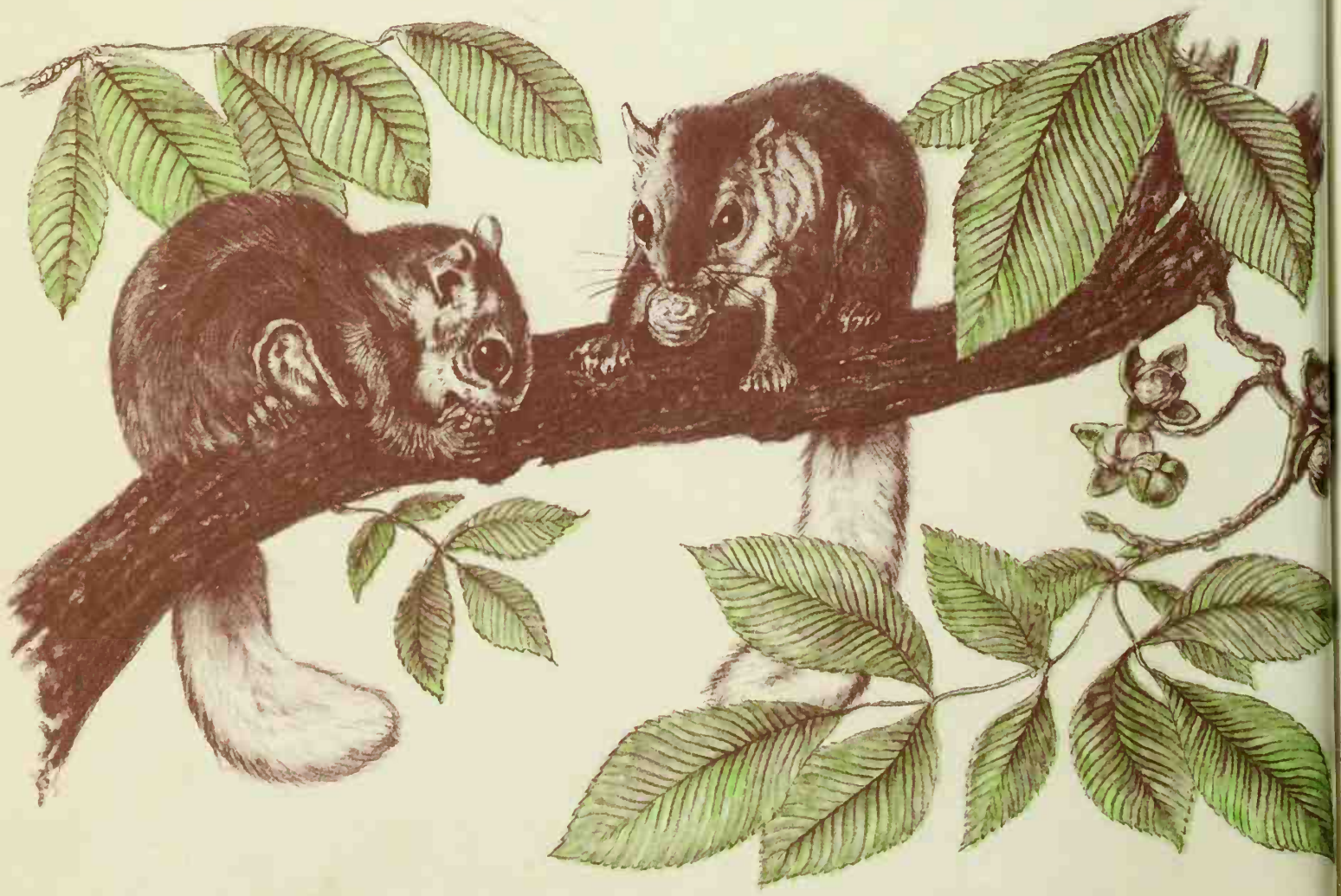


Have you ever watched a gray squirrel scamper through the trees? He runs along the branches. He leaps from one branch to another. But if the trees are too far apart, he runs down the trunk to the ground. Then he races to the next tree.

Flying squirrels are just as quick and graceful in the treetops. If there is a space between trees, they simply glide across. Usually a flying squirrel lands on a tree trunk. He does not go down to the ground very often. The extra flaps of skin on his sides make him clumsy on the ground. And if he lands in water by mistake, he will be in trouble. He is too clumsy to swim well. But he usually lives near water. He needs plenty of water to drink, especially when the weather is hot.



Up in the treetops the flying squirrel finds plenty to eat. He eats nuts, like other squirrels. His sharp little teeth make a neat hole in a nut. Then he takes out the good meat. He loves acorns and hickory nuts. But some nutshells are too hard for him. He cannot eat a walnut.



Seeds and fruits and berries are good foods for flying squirrels. They also catch moths and beetles. They eat grubs too. In fact, a flying squirrel likes a wormy acorn even better than a good one. He will eat the eggs from a bird's nest. And he may sneak into a farmer's storehouse and nibble at meat or grain. But flying squirrels do not steal enough to be real pests to the farmer.

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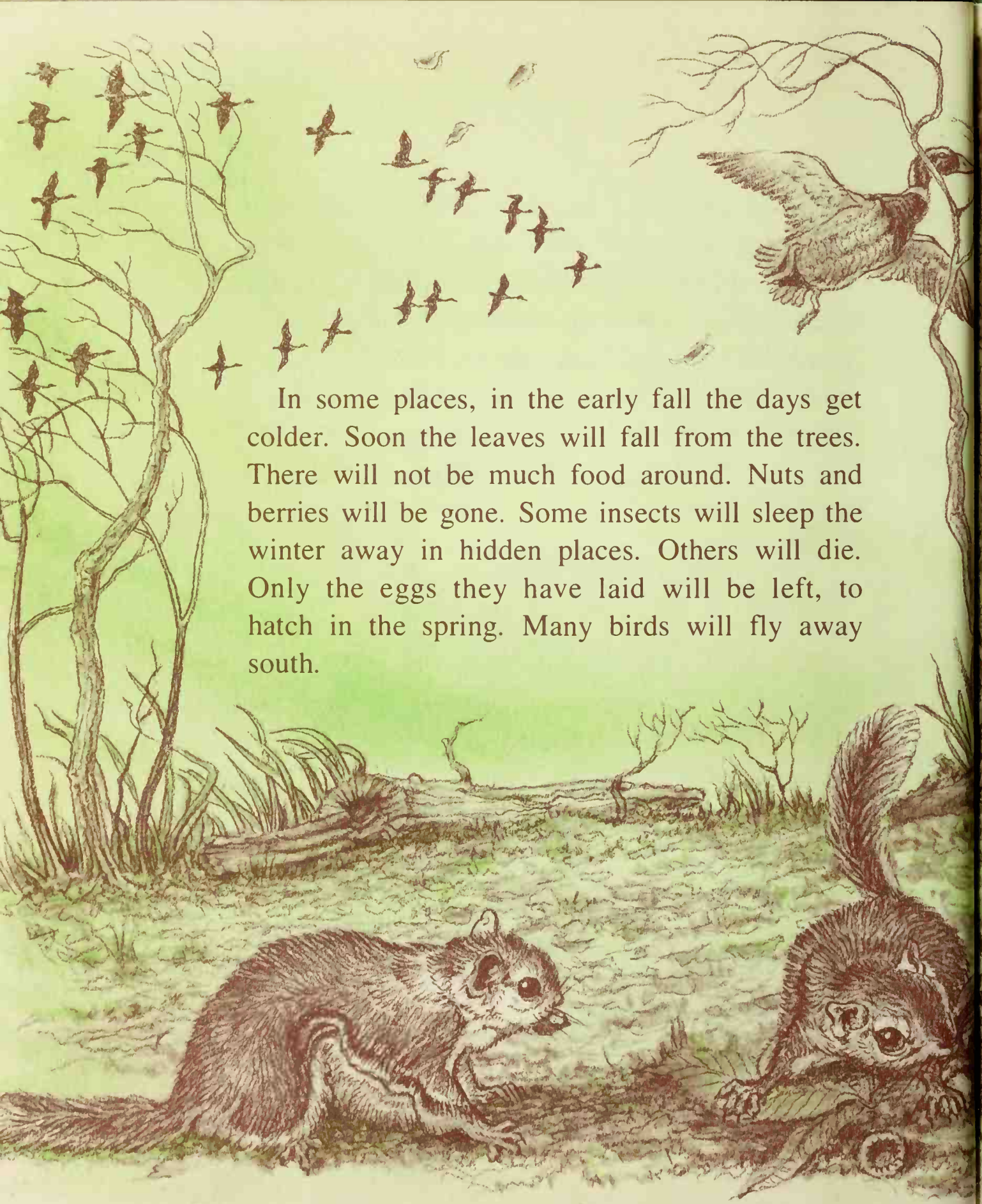
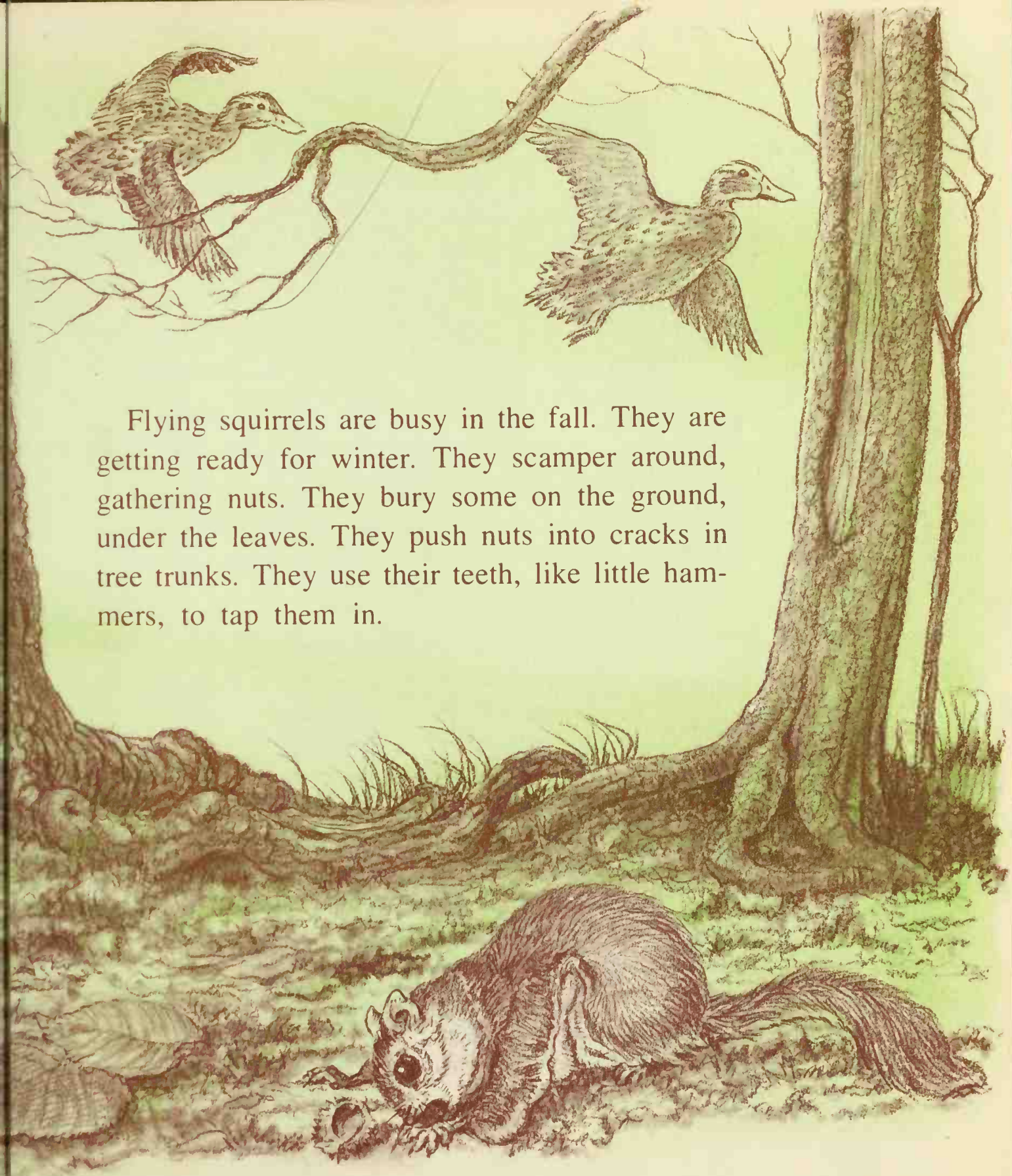


In some places, in the early fall the days get colder. Soon the leaves will fall from the trees. There will not be much food around. Nuts and berries will be gone. Some insects will sleep the winter away in hidden places. Others will die. Only the eggs they have laid will be left, to hatch in the spring. Many birds will fly away south.



Flying squirrels are busy in the fall. They are getting ready for winter. They scamper around, gathering nuts. They bury some on the ground, under the leaves. They push nuts into cracks in tree trunks. They use their teeth, like little hammers, to tap them in.

In September the flying squirrels get a new warm coat. They grow thick, soft fur and the old fur falls out. The new fur coat looks just like the old one. It is a gray or reddish-brown on the squirrel's back and creamy-white underneath.

As the days grow shorter flying squirrels move in together. Two dozen of them may live in the same nest. They help each other gather nuts. They line their nest hole with fur and moss and dry leaves. On cold days they snuggle together in the nest. They help keep each other warm. When it is stormy or very cold they may not go outside at all. They doze away in the nest.

The winter comes and goes. The days get longer again. The flying squirrels leave their nests more and more. In February and March it is mating time. About forty days later the babies are born. Each mother flying squirrel has three or four babies. They are tiny. Each one weighs less than a penny. They have no fur at all. They will not get their fur till they are almost two weeks old. Their eyes and ears are tightly shut. They cannot open them. Their eyes and ears will stay shut until they are nearly a month old.

Flying squirrel babies are helpless. They cannot see or walk or even crawl. All they can do is drink their mother's milk.

The mother flying squirrel is a good mother. When the babies are very young she stays in the nest almost all the time. She dashes out at dusk to get something to eat. She may go out again just before dawn. From time to time she pops out to leave her droppings outside. For she is a careful housekeeper. But she never leaves her babies for more than a few minutes at a time. Every hour or two they nuzzle under her to drink her milk.

The baby flying squirrels grow quickly. For the first five weeks they have nothing to eat but their mother's milk. Then she starts to bring them solid food. They nibble on juicy insect grubs or the tender tips of twigs. By the time they are two months old they will not need their mother's milk any more.

The mother flying squirrel is very gentle with her babies. But she will defend them fearlessly if they are in danger. She will not let even their father come near them.

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One time some men cut down a tree with a flying squirrel nest in it. When the men saw the nest they picked up the babies. Their mother heard them squeaking. She climbed right up the men's clothes and took her babies, one by one. She rolled each baby into a little ball. Then she took its loose belly skin in her teeth. She climbed up a tree and glided to another one which had a hole in its trunk. One at a time, she put each baby in the new nest. As soon as she had left one, she came back to get the next.

When the young flying squirrels are about six weeks old they look just like tiny copies of their parents. They know how to comb their hair with their nails. They know how to give themselves a bath with their tongues. They can climb up and down the trees. Now it is time for some flying lessons.

The babies' first glides are short ones. They go only from one branch to another. If one falls, it cries. Then its mother hurries to pick it up. She holds its loose skin in her mouth and scampers with it back up the tree.

Next, the mother teaches her babies to glide from one tree to another. At first they do not want to do this. They seem frightened. But their mother chirps to them. She shows them what to do. Soon they are gliding to her.

The mother flying squirrel does not have to stay with her babies all the time now. But if she hears them squeaking in the nest she dashes back to them.

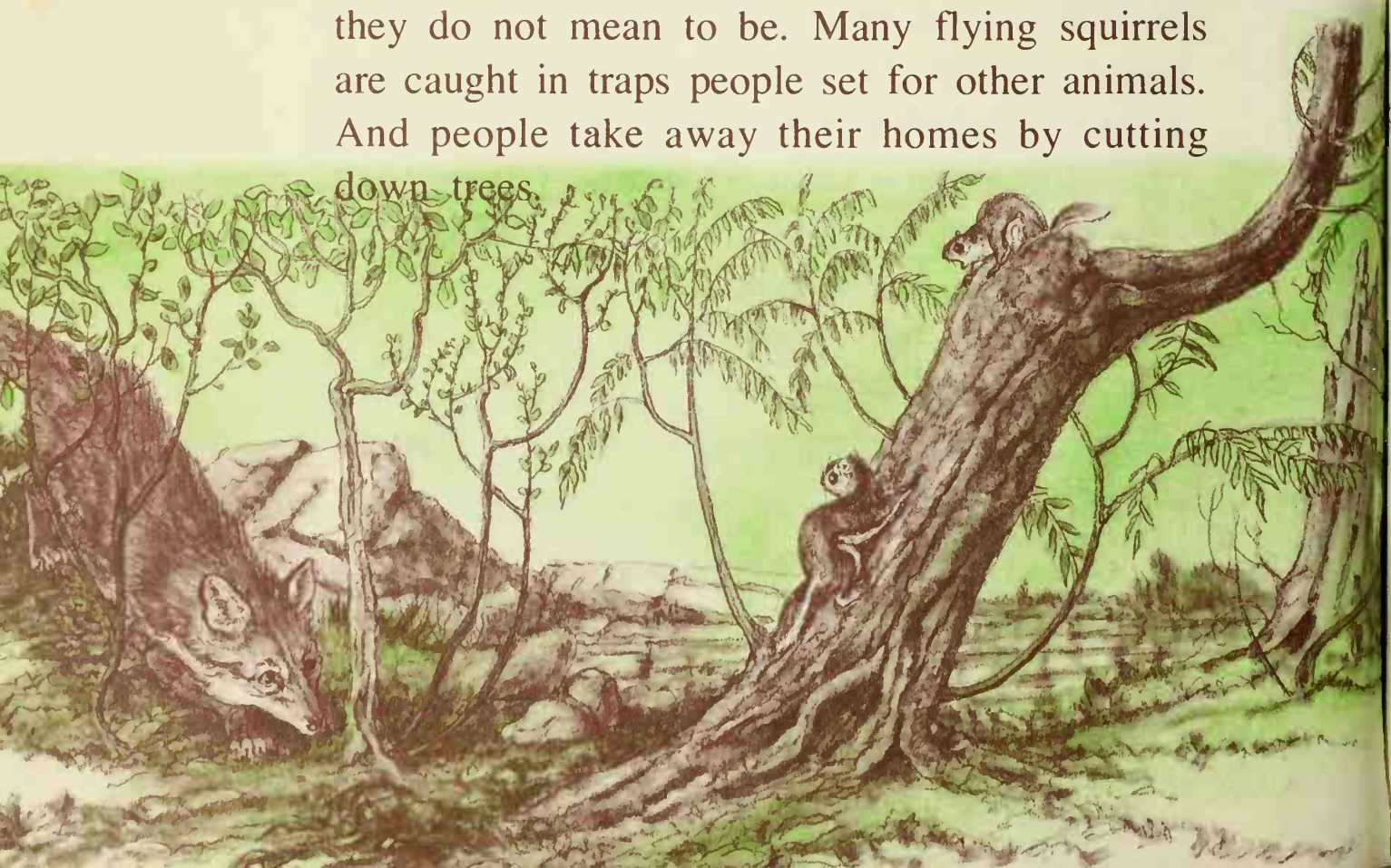
More and more often the young squirrels go outside with their mother. They scamper through the trees. Sometimes they are quiet. Sometimes they make a noise which sounds like "chuck-chuck-chuck." Sometimes they chirp like little birds.

When the young flying squirrels are three or four months old they lose their baby fur. They get a fine fur coat just like their parents'. After a while the young squirrels may make homes of their own in nearby hollow trees. But more often they stay with their mother. The whole family may stay together until the mother is ready to have new babies. When her first babies are a year old some of them may have babies of their own. But others may not mate until they are two years old.

If flying squirrels are angry, they make a sharp sound. And they may stamp their feet. If they are frightened they may squeal. They bark to warn other flying squirrels of danger.

Flying squirrels are full grown when they are a year and a half old. They start to get old when they are about three. But they may live to be five or six years of age, or even longer.

Not many flying squirrels live to a ripe old age, however. Life up in the treetops is dangerous. Owls and hawks and ravens may swoop down to catch them. Foxes and bobcats may catch them when they are on the ground. So may prowling house cats. Weasels climb trees and slink into flying squirrel nests. People are often enemies of flying squirrels, even when they do not mean to be. Many flying squirrels are caught in traps people set for other animals. And people take away their homes by cutting down trees.



Flying squirrels build nests in old woodpecker holes, or in nests that other squirrels have left. They often choose rotting hollow trees to make their homes in. These are the trees most likely to be cut down.

It is a pity that people become enemies of flying squirrels. For these little animals are very friendly and gentle. People who have picked up wild flying squirrels say that they do not even try to bite. Most wild animals do. You can get a nasty nip if you try to pick up a gray squirrel.

Flying squirrels are so friendly and gentle that they make good pets. Usually it is not a good idea to try to tame wild animals. Many of them are so frightened at being caught that they die. But some pet shops sell tame flying squirrels, who are used to people.

A pet flying squirrel is lots of fun. When you let him out of his cage he will glide around the room. He goes so fast you can hardly see him jump. You can teach him to come when you call him. He flies through the air, straight at you. It seems that he will crash right into you. But he comes down light as a feather. He loves to be cuddled and petted. But you must be careful. If you squeeze him too hard you may hurt him.

There is only one trouble with a pet flying squirrel. You can play with him only after dark. During the day he will be fast asleep. If you wake him up the sunlight will hurt his eyes. But after the sun goes down he is ready for a night of fun.

Night has settled over the forest. Most of the forest creatures are asleep—but not the flying squirrel. He has just waked up from his long day's nap and is ready for action. He stations himself on a branch of the old beech tree and looks about him carefully. He is planning his first glide. There he goes, sailing through the air! The special flaps of skin on each side of his body are spread out, making him look like a square kite. He can turn and dive, twist and dodge if he needs to, and he can travel as far as a hundred and fifty feet in a single glide.

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